

## **Teaching Social Work Students against the Grain: Negotiating the Constraints and Possibilities**

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Students who have followed routes to Western universities other than the 'traditional' one - that is, an uninterrupted, linear path from school to university - face greater challenges to their democratic participation in higher education than their 'traditional' counterparts. Until recently, universities have predominantly expected students with diverse entry points to assimilate into existing curricula and academic modes of operating. Such expectation, when combined with reductionist managerial accountability, has largely marginalised non-traditional students. This paper reports on a project which aimed to reverse this marginalisation in an Australian Bachelor of Social Work degree. It is argued that students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, having greater challenges in negotiating privileged academic and discipline literacies, are better served pedagogically by curriculum design that resonates with their lifeworlds and makes tacit assumptions in university literacies explicit. Using practitioner action research in a partnership between a social work and an academic language and learning academic, pedagogic approaches that utilised students' literacy practices as assets for learning were enacted over two research cycles. The possibilities and constraints that emerged to support students' learning and more equitable participation were examined. Findings from student questionnaires and focus groups, interviews with the educators and the researcher's field journal suggest that, with explicit attention to the discourses (sayings), activities (doings) and social relationships (relatings) which infuse the complex practice architectures of university classrooms, it is possible, even under current preoccupations with measurements and budget constraints, to signal key points of negotiation for pedagogic change to respond more inclusively and equitably to contemporary university students.

Keywords: curriculum; pedagogies; non-traditional students; the measured university

## Introduction

Western higher education is more open than at any other time in history, as diverse students enter university through policies of widening participation and global markets. Policy imperatives to increase higher education students from diverse backgrounds have highlighted the need to improve student engagement and retention (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 736). In Australia, a government supported *Review of Higher Education* and subsequent government response led to an injection of funding to boost enrolments and retention from targeted equity groups, that is, traditionally under-represented students from culturally, linguistically and educationally diverse backgrounds, low socio-economic status (SES), first in family to attend university, Indigenous or with disabilities (Bradley, 2008; DEEWR, 2009). Recent policy moves to a demand-driven system in Australia have enabled increased access of equity groups - especially those from low SES - although Indigenous students remain significantly under-represented (Edwards & McMillan, 2015, p. 2).

Western universities have generally met these changes with selectively limited curricular and pedagogic practices, often framing newer students as 'deficit' and remaining unresponsive to the educational needs of diverse students (Haggis, 2006; Sheridan, 2011). Exceptions have been Transition Pedagogies in the US (Tinto, 1993, 1997; Cuseo, 2010), UK (Reay, 2001; Thomas, 2002), and developed in Australia to include curricular and institution-wide strategies to support students' transitions into university (Kift, 2009, 2010). These have made some impact, particularly in the first year, which is traditionally vulnerable to attrition (Kift, 2010).

From the perspective of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011) and critical sociology of education (Bourdieu, 1988) diverse students in higher education are still encouraged to fit into the existing codes, values and practices of universities, rather than contribute

their own knowledge and experience. Students' diverse cultural histories and experiences often remain subordinated to the dominant cultural norms that have been instituted as 'mainstream' through the power of privileged groups (Hooks, 1994; Delpit, 1995). Scholars argue that 'assimilationist' approaches to student diversity continue to predominate in higher education (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012; Zepke et al., 2006). Gale and Parker (2015, p. 741) suggest that such pedagogies fail to "move beyond students' socialisation and induction into dominant norms" and are "primarily institution and system-serving" (p. 735). Thomas (2002, p. 431) observes that pedagogy then becomes "not an instrument of teaching, so much as socialising and reinforcing status".

This paper argues that students from diverse backgrounds are served more equitably and pedagogically by curriculum that invites them into learning spaces as co-contributors to knowledge and makes tacit assumptions explicit. Pedagogies that draw on students' life-worlds as assets for learning - in collaborative and inclusive spaces in which students are encouraged to share their beliefs, knowledge and experiences - can then use these to scaffold to new learning. When students' histories and subjectivities are engaged and connected to new learning, Gale and Parker (2015, p. 738) suggest that students can better navigate "multiple narratives and subjectivities" they are encountering; pedagogy is reinstated as teaching, rather than socialisation. Our argument joins scholarship which states that, despite the economic and socio-political agendas besetting contemporary universities, the educational needs and aspirations of diverse students require a range of alternatives to traditional curricular and pedagogic practices that select for structurally privileged learners to succeed (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Devlin & McKay, 2016).

The context, theory, and research informing this claim are discussed, followed by action research findings that highlight the possibilities and challenges in committing to these alternative pedagogic practices; particularly when universities are preoccupied with a governmentality of budget and a measurement syndrome that can obscure educative opportunities and inequities. Findings suggest that policies of massification, while welcome, operate in a depleted funding context that makes learning and curriculum change challenging for both students and their educators.

### **The Measured University**

Central to policies to increase participation in higher education is the intention to enhance economic outcomes. Tomlinson (2013, p. 124) states:

Higher education no longer has a potentially important role in enhancing economic outcomes, but instead a *central* one. The core defining goal of higher education is to service the economy in an as efficient and transparent way as possible, and its core activities – namely teaching, learning and research – should be maximally tailored to this end.

This policy intention, related to market principles and neoliberal ideologies infusing public systems, has increased pressure on higher education to develop institutional practices and outcomes that are commensurate with shifting economic and market-driven demands (Tomlinson, 2013). Intensifying these pressures is the escalated reliance on measurement, statistical data and competitive comparisons to inform educational policy (Biesta, 2009; Lingard, 2011). While rankings, data and statistics have long been central to informing government policies, their significance has become more central in neoliberal ideologies, shifting the political focus “from government to governance” (Lingard 2011, p. 356). The fiscal necessity of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability has given rise to a measurement, auditing and evidence-based

culture, which has been used as a regulatory tool in public service delivery (Lingard, 2011).

In higher education, these accountability demands manifest in performance measures on teaching and research allied to market-driven information, such as student satisfaction, university ranking and international benchmarking (Tomlinson, 2013). In the Australian context, competitive funding models framed on student choice generate a fertile environment to heighten internal levels of accountability and measurement. While there is some recognition of the benefits to increased accountability and competition to stimulate innovation and redress neglect of undergraduate teaching, scholars agree that this development can oversimplify complexity and divert from the quality and purposes of higher education (Alexander, 2008; Palfreyman, 2013; Darwin, 2015).

Biesta (2009, p. 35) raises questions about whether this measurement culture results in valuing what can easily be measured, rather than engaging explicitly with values about what is educationally desirable. For example, the ability of the university to effectively market and promote itself has progressively become inextricably linked with student satisfaction outcomes and integral to institutional quality assurance systems. Darwin (2015) observes that student feedback based evaluation has essentially become a proxy for teaching quality, creating an “urgent epistemological challenge in the contemporary Australian university” (p. 430). Alexander (2008, p. 97) discusses how these measurements infiltrate pedagogies and classroom interactions:

[T]he power differential is no longer merely that between teacher and taught, but between teachers and the official keepers and enforcers of the policies that prescribe their teaching. Further, the sanctions that everywhere attend the unequal distribution of power are no longer limited by the rules and customs of the

classroom or school but transmit to students their teachers' consciousness of the national apparatus of targets, levels, league tables and inspections.

Market-based agendas that have overtaken higher education in recent decades can generate norms that operate as constraints to pedagogies with alternative (educative) agendas. Internal accountabilities and measurements of 'numbers' can turn into forms of control with academics fearing being judged against norms that have gathered heightened power, but are not necessarily reflective of 'good' education (Biesta, 2009).

### ***The Problem with "More of the Same" Pedagogies***

Research indicates that curricular and pedagogic practices in the context of widening participation have changed minimally in higher education. Marr, Curry, and Rose-Adams (2014, p. 146) maintain that "an increasingly diverse student body continues to pose significant challenges to higher education institutions seeking to maximise retention of, and outcomes, for their students." Bassit and Tomlinson (2012) caution that even with widening participation in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, the higher social classes continue to benefit most from university expansion. Previously excluded groups now apply and enter, but they largely attend the newer and less prestigious institutions, rather than the traditional ones, and the complex barriers facing students from working class and minority ethnic group backgrounds remain and expand (Gorard et al., 2006; Rios-Aguilar & Marquez Kiyama, 2012).

Marginson (2013, p. 355) observes that ideologies and reforms in higher education over recent decades have resulted in more emphasis on financial "efficiency" and "productivity" in volume terms, but "there is no evidence that teaching is better." Australian research of newer university students recommends "critical interventions" to encourage more equitable access, effective participation and completion of non-

traditional students; central to these critical interventions is the “consideration of student disadvantage in course structure and curriculum design” (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013, p. 35). Research by McKay and Devlin (2014, p. 950) has identified the importance of demystifying academic culture, through explicitly teaching the discourse, as one of the most important steps institutions and staff can take in assisting students from low SES backgrounds. Gale and Tranter (2011, p. 43) recommend deeper university understanding and inclusion of the knowledges, values and understandings that students bring to university through their recognition in curriculum and pedagogy. Such epistemologies do not fit an ‘expert’ model of education, which privileges elite forms and sources of knowledge, thus reproducing the socio-structural power relations that underpin them.

### ***Pedagogy as a Dialectical Relationship***

More equitable pedagogies need to both “redistribute codes of elite cultural embodiment” to those who have not previously inherited them, by making them explicit and practicable, and building curriculum “that recognises, valorises and makes use of knowledge from students’ home and community lifeworlds” (Zipin, 2009, p. 318). Zipin argues that the latter are not only vital as assets for effectively engaging students in learning; they are also ethically crucial for valuing and perpetuating learners’ cultural traditions. The explicit redistribution of elite codes that are usually tacit and inaccessible has been constructively activated in Academic Literacies research (Lillis, 2003; Lea, 2008) and more recently in identifying constructive approaches for low SES students (McKay & Devlin, 2015). Pedagogies valorising students’ cultural inheritances, however, have had much less attention in higher education (Van Niel, 2010), but have been conceptualised helpfully by those who take a Funds of Knowledge approach, originally in the United States, with more recent take up in Australia (Zipin, 2013).



These alternative approaches are based on the Vygotskian dialectic between students' lifeworlds, their "local histories and community contexts" and the new knowledge, which mediate each other for meaning-making (Moll, 2014, p. 35). Vygotsky (1978) argued that meaning-making in the educative process develops through a dialectical interaction between students' everyday "spontaneous" concepts and the formal "scientific" concepts encountered in schooling. Such dialectic identifies the developmental continuum between what the learners can do independently and what they can gain capacity to do with teaching-and-learning assistance from others, "the proximal level of development" (Vygotsky as cited in Moll, 2014, p. 33). Calls for more responsive pedagogies utilizing dialectical relationships, however, can often go unnoticed in an unsympathetic higher educational system with less time and resources to address educative challenges.

### ***Social Work Education in the Measured University***

Social work (SW) education has some compatibility with this dialectic in that its subject matter invites students' experience into the classroom. Central to engaging with others, particularly in cross-cultural encounters, is being able to identify and critically assess one's assumptions, frames of reference, and habits of mind through reflective discourse, cultivated through dialogue with others (Lee & Greene, 2004; Mezirow, 2000). Given social justice and diversity are central to SW practice and education, it has been a potential site to mobilise against structural reproduction and welcome more inclusion and diversity (Garran, Kang, & Fraser, 2014). SW education seeks to invite students' experiences, differences of opinion and ambiguities into classroom conversations through dialogic and collaborative pedagogies (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005). Recent discussion has highlighted the inherent challenges and pedagogic skill required to navigate complex and emotionally charged dialogue in SW classrooms (Peterson,

Farmer, & Zippay, 2014; Bogo & Wayne, 2013). Compounding these challenges, the SW profession has been exposed to the same marketisation pressures as universities, with policies promoting privatised responsibility for core services, an administrative managerial framework and undermining the Welfare State. This has tended to privilege technical competence over critical engagement, and injected conservative slants into debates about what knowledge and skills define the professional SW role (Fook & Askeland, 2007). Teaching SW to diverse students in a massified, resource-stretched tertiary education system adds complexity for these pedagogies (Garran, Kang, & Fraser, 2014).

Introducing change in an education system built on long established, mono-cultural and elite pedagogic practices is challenging in a system that increasingly relies on oversimplified measurement, and shapes its core activities - teaching, learning and research - to meet economic outcomes. The present study, a collaboration between a SW and an academic language and learning (ALL) academic, examined possibilities and constraints that operated through practitioner action research when enacting pedagogies potentially more responsive and equitable to newer and diverse students in a Bachelor of Social Work in an Australian university. While the introduced pedagogies have been described more fully elsewhere (Daddow, 2016), this paper focuses on the constraints that emerged when putting the pedagogies into practice, exposing the challenges of educating in the measured university. Although this research was undertaken in the discipline of Social Work, our critique of educational practice in higher education has relevance to all students, and disciplines beyond Social Work.

## **Methodology**

The study took place over two semesters in 2013 at an Australian university with a

significantly higher representation of diverse students than most other universities.

Around 20% of all domestic undergraduate commencing students came from families in the bottom SES quartile, compared to a national average of 18% (DET, 2016). Many were either immigrants to Australia or the children of immigrants. At the time of writing, humanities students were generally accepted into the university with relatively low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores, suggesting lower levels of preparedness for university entrance.

The participants were students of two undergraduate units, the unit coordinator (practitioner researcher), three tutors and one ALL educator. The authors of this paper are the researcher and the ALL educator who planned, taught and reflected together and enacted the research. While the majority of students were female, as consistent with the profession, there was a significant degree of diversity in both units of study, particularly in terms of being the first in family to attend university (74.4% and 82.7% respectively in the two cycles), cultural and linguistic diversity (51.3% born in Australia, the remainder originating from 23 other countries; 68% born in Australia, the remainder originating from 16 other countries), as well as status (75 % of the students in both cohorts came from low or medium SES backgrounds). All four educators agreed to be interviewed and 41% and 48% of students completed the questionnaires respectively in the two cycles; 4 students and 6 students participated in the focus groups over the two cycles.

Practitioner action research provided the methodological framework to address the identified problem through repeated action, reflection and change in the real-world context of a university. We aimed at changing our understandings and the conditions in which we practice, illuminating the norms that shape current practices, and the power these have to constrain or enable change (Kemmis, 2009). These “practice

architectures”, held in place by cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements, inevitably interact and support each other (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 55).

The practitioner researcher was researching from inside the setting, in collaboration with other educators, the students and SW colleagues. This provided a rich opportunity to deepen “local knowledge” around practice in the BSW and “public knowledge” in relation to the wider tertiary context, illustrating insights and implications for other disciplines and institutions (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 6). However, insider research reduces distance and detachment from the subjects of the research, which can lead to myopic and biased perspectives (Mercer, 2007). The personal stake and emotional investment, potentially influencing the interpretation of the data sources, were recognised and redressed through reflexivity and inviting “multiple voices” into the research through the use of extensive participant quotes in the reporting of data (Tracy, 2010). To minimise any sense of coercion or obligation among the students, questionnaires were distributed by others to be completed anonymously while the researcher stepped out of the room; focus group interviews took place after assessments had been marked and returned. Data was analysed using interpretive thematic analysis to identify key concepts, themes and issues, consistent with the principles of Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) and relating to the institutional openings and constraints for the pedagogies in the university environment. The research was approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 12/145).

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section discusses findings that emerged from the lived experience and multiple perspectives of the stakeholders as the pedagogies were enacted in the action research.

For the purposes of this paper, discussion is focused on two major themes: “time and space” and “levers and measures.”

### *Time and space*

Time and space are key material affordances that enable or constrain the interactions between students and teachers, shaped by socio-political arrangements. When introducing pedagogies, we were working within prescribed structures: lecture-tutorial formats, timetables, graded assessments, and class sizes, supported by the sayings and doings of practice and influenced by prevailing ideologies and the weight of history (relatings). While innovation always takes place in these realities, the action research highlighted how these impacted on the capacity to respond to the educational needs of diverse students. The researcher’s field journal indicates grappling with these realities:

Given the dialogic approach of FoK, a 60 minute lecture and 60 minute tutorial seems short - also the physical layout of the room. In lecture style makes it hard to form small groups, as students tease out the new knowledge or their experience...Feeling that FoK are getting ‘lip service’ a bit in the curriculum design ... Wanting to foreground the student voice, but this is quite foreign - perhaps especially in a theory based unit. It feels foreign and challenging.

This excerpt illustrates the tension between discipline content and the preferred pedagogy of foregrounding students’ ontologies and epistemologies: the limited time and space (a 60-minute lecture and tutorial) with their pre-configured patterns of social relationships between the lecturer and the students versus the building of dialogic relationships in which dialectic pedagogies emerge to support learning. The coercive path of conforming to the pre-configured norms of existing architectures felt foreign and challenging when seeking alternative educative relationships.

The anxiety of non-traditional or new students, particularly in large groups and spaces, can go unnoticed by pre-shaped spaces such as the lecture format. One mature-aged student said that she had not been to university for 20 years, and was finding the prospect of the first class “nerve-wracking”. A discipline tutor commented on the connection between student anxieties and space in her interview:

In your efforts in the early lectures there was like deadly silence. Now that was partly a lot of new people, feeling unsure, a very big room full of a lot of people they didn't know, people fearful, knowing that they are being judged in a way that they are not used to being judged... people take a while to find their feet with multiple new experiences. And I think ...the big room was the problem in the lecture format.

If formal relationships of power and authority are pre-configured by time and space, it becomes difficult to develop trust allowing students to reveal lifeworlds that may feel alien to the university world and, in turn, for educators to draw on these to make pedagogic connections. The inhibiting effect of a large lecture group early in a course challenged us to act educationally and not as performers of university routines shaped by others.

It needs time and space to tease out some of the complexities of the teaching environment in dialogic and respectful ways, developing new classroom sayings and relatings (Bogo & Wayne, 2013). For example, one student wrote in the student questionnaire that she felt “punished” by expressing her own views, which were at variance with dominant views in the class: “I felt very isolated, as I felt that I was picked on because of some of the judgements on particular issues.” While education can be empowering, it can also be costly in terms of reworking identities and “deep relational dispositions” (Zipin, 2009, p. 328), which can impact on study progress and everyday life, such as shifting relationships in families or with friends. The student

described the most challenging aspect of the experience as "confronting my values, and learning to accept things that go against my religion", noticing a forceful shift in her relations between the world at home and the university world. She was not the only one who referred to tensions in relationships at home specifically due to students' growing awareness through the education process. These tensions can require sensitive and timely responses from academic staff. Such attention to students' lifeworlds are not factored into performance measures of teaching quality that increasingly rely on student satisfaction, university ranking and other quality assurance measures. Nor are they factored into academic workloads; but they emerged as an integral part of our lived teaching and learning experience at the university.

The limited systemic recognition of the complexity of contemporary teaching in higher education, and the importance of the concomitant curricular and pedagogic work, can leave educators ambivalent about designing curricula that make cultural connections with students' lifeworlds. As teachers, who strived to see students as embodying cultural 'assets' rather than 'deficits' for learning, we faced the "formidable difficulties of teaching against the grain... of working with learners who do not embody institutionally privileged cultural capital" (Ovsienko and Zipin, 2006, p. 1). The emotional labours of educators who work with students who are from less powerfully positioned families, with internalised injuries associated with their socio-structural and cultural discursive positions, while contending with powerful institutional norms, can be overwhelming (ibid). It requires critical insight and political-ethical will to teach against the grain. Such emotional labour, and the time involved, was experienced as enablers of students' identity formation when we were able to work against the grain of traditional pedagogies, and constraints that limited the openings the practitioner research could create.

The theme of time and space echoed throughout the project from educators and students alike. In response to the survey question “What would you change to better meet your learning needs?” several students commented on the lack of time:

Student 1: Longer tutorial time...the tutorial time should be 1.5 hours...most of the time we were just running out of time.

Student 2: longer lectures needed!

Student 3: More time...the lectures and tutorials were too short.

Even with the limitations of time and space, largely governed by budgetary decisions, the researchers were able to introduce the pedagogies to good effect. One example is highlighted here to note points of negotiation for the ongoing pedagogic work. The semester’s last session was designed for students to identify their resiliencies and strategies to prepare them for the demands of study and their professional lives beyond graduation. A student in the focus group interview commented:

I think the last session on self-care...was really important...speaking with people that I know, they were like, “that is really impressive that you have had that time to reflect”. And the discussion we had with picking our strengths and weaknesses was just fantastic. It was really invaluable.

The student (and her colleagues) were surprised by the teachers’ attention to their lifeworlds (“that is really impressive that you have had that time to reflect”) and commented on how the dialectic approach enriched their learning, contrasting it with other teaching experiences that did not create this connected space. The same student elaborated:

There were a lot of things that were really close to home that got brought up and I was sort of really struggling ... with one particular essay...I just couldn’t get going on it because it was just too close to home...I am too upset and I just want to ...vent all this anger and frustration... and I was struggling to get into academic



mode because I am just too passionate about it, it is making me too angry. And just be able to have maybe some ideas around how to deal with those feelings...

This quote illustrates the stress levels that were activated as she was ontologically engaged with her studies (“a lot of things that were really close to home”) and was wrestling with the different literacy practices required for this engagement (“I was struggling to get into academic mode”). It highlights the very real tensions of moving between various literacies and genres as she engaged in her studies, and yet, with curricular attention to bridging between her lifeworlds and that of the university’s requirements, she managed this anxiety and the necessary transitions. Even within prescribed pedagogic structures, educators can be alert to the educative opportunities held within dialogic relationships that encourage engagement with students’ lifeworlds, as bridges to new knowledge.

### ***Levers and Measures***

Government policy decisions around university accountabilities, with underlying human capital, cost-saving and other economic rationales, created internal levers and measures that operated as constraints to the explicit and reflexive use of literacies. This section looks at academic workloads and the university’s protracted course approval system with prescribed number of cumulative words for assessments (designed to meet compliance with external accountability systems).

Academics at universities try to do ‘more with less’, in an environment of managerialist impositions, reduced staff, increased student numbers, and more complex student needs. In the wake of widening participation, academic work has diversified and will continue to diversify, and academics are struggling to manage existing workloads. The ALL educator commented that for the researcher, five hours of lecturing and

tutoring, with a short break (often interrupted by student enquiries) for two consecutive days with the additional demands of unit coordination, impacted on the energy for team teaching and foregrounding student epistemologies. This was an accurate observation which, beyond the reality of academic workloads, was exacerbated by the uncertainty of a significant university restructure. The researcher's field journal illustrates this:

In preparing for the lecture this week, I thought, it is all I can do to think about content and how to teach that, let alone anything on literacies. Feeling time and work pressures...University restructure meant that I had to apply for five jobs this week and consider the prospect of interviews.

Central to our pedagogic innovations was reviewing and modifying assessment tasks to make them more explicit to students in class discussions, using scaffolding and providing detailed feedback on progressive assessments. This was more challenging than we had expected. The university's extensive course approval system required an outline of assessments long before teaching commenced and the opportunity of meeting the students and understanding their contributions. It could be changed only with time-consuming administrative effort. The researcher noted in her field journal:

I inherited a curriculum to which I made minor changes – once you start changing assessments there is a lengthy and cumbersome process of course approval....There is therefore little incentive to make innovative changes to assessments or curricula that is already set.

These institutional arrangements and power relationships were influencing our practice and relations with students and colleagues. We found that the university focused “so intently on the standardisation of what is intended to be educational for students” that it destroyed “what is at the heart of education: the pedagogical triangle that connects a student, a teacher, and a social context” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 213). Nevertheless we persevered in developing assessment tasks that addressed in-practice problems

important to our context. In the second research cycle, we introduced reflective writing into the syllabus to bridge between the students' life-world and disciplinary knowledges, and to strengthen critical reflection. The task was well received by the students who expressed in the focus group interview how pivotal it had been in their learning:

Student 1: I think the first assessment, the reflection on the purpose of social work that was really...good because it made me sort of think, go deeper about the social biography and all of that. All the things that make that up and how that can influence the...values and the way we go about social work...

Student 2: Yeah, I was going to say the same thing; that first assignment when we really... had to stop and think about the way our own background... is going to influence or bias our work was really something I had never thought about before.

Students were making dialectical connections between their personal biographies, including their experiences and values, and the perspectives and values underpinning SW practice, which they found significantly supported their learning. Targeting the proximal zone that extends from what learners know through life-based engagement, into further and more systematic understandings can occur but it takes considerable commitment and energy from the educators to renegotiate ingrained traditional practices in the context of standardised curricula with internalised emphasis on 'expert' knowledge.

Despite this success we became aware of the lure of conceding to 'safe teaching' and traditional assessments given that changes were cumbersome and time-consuming. Requirements to comply with extensive monitoring and workloads tailored to meet budgets can make academics "more instrumental in their attitudes and behaviour" (Naidoo & Williams, 2014, p. 10). Our awareness of how institutional architectures configured our practices, whether they were supportive of our pedagogic intentions or

not, was heightened when we reflected during and after action research cycles. The way we related to these practice architectures and broader systems reflected our limited sense of agency in a large bureaucracy; particularly the researcher as a newcomer to the discipline, the ALL educator with a more marginal status in the university, and introducing pedagogies that went ‘against the grain’ of established pedagogic practices.

## **Conclusion**

Providing access to students from diverse backgrounds into universities invokes an ethical imperative to examine more equitable curricular and pedagogic practices as traditional pedagogies built on elite models risk marginalisation and exclusion. This action research sought to enact pedagogies that taught unfamiliar discourses – and recognised, valorised and made use of knowledge from students’ lifeworlds as scaffolds to curriculum. The findings demonstrated significant equitable and educative potential, even in the measured university. Equally significant, however, were the challenges encountered as the agendas, internalised norms and institutional practices drew our attention away from our educative intent. The project highlighted the depth of students’ anxieties in the unfamiliar university world and the complexities for educators responding to this anxiety and diverse educative needs. The socio-political context, driven by budget-related agendas, can obscure and work against these pressing realities.

Although as insider researchers we were operating from our own partial lenses, having two of us to plan, enact and reflect kept us more honest and aware of the issues as they emerged, despite being somewhat implicated in the existing practice arrangements. The research indicated that all students (not only from diverse or non-traditional backgrounds) responded positively to the pedagogies, as they were grounded in robust educational theory. Further cycles of research are in progress to allow more

data on longitudinal progress, results and retention to emerge to clarify the pedagogies' potentials for wider application in higher education and other disciplines.

At a time of simple solutions to complex problems and shifting discourses about teaching quality, addressing student disadvantage in curriculum design becomes crucial. This action research was one small step toward countering the urgent epistemological challenge we identified in the contemporary university, by bringing students' epistemologies into the practice site, enabling the potential of all students and their contribution to civic society.

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